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WORLD NEWS

Lebanese Mutiny Threatens to Split Nation

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Washington Post Foreign Service

BEIRUT, March 18—The uprising began as a seemingly parochial feud over a lucrative toll booth set up by right-wing Christian militiamen about 30 miles north of Beirut on the coastal highway to Tripoli.

But it evolved into a growing rebellion against the leadership of the Phalangist Party, which since its foundation half a century ago has been dominated by the family dynasty of the late Pierre Gemayel.

In the course of six days, this action of charismatic Christian militia commander Samir Geagea is now being described by its rhetorical advocates and armed enforcers as a "Christian revolution" destined to change the course of history in war-ravaged Lebanon and perhaps in the entire region.

The rhetoric notwithstanding, the balding, 32-year-old Geagea's mostly bloodless coup d'etat in the mainstream Christian Phalangists' Israeli-equipped militia, the 6,000-man Lebanese Forces, and his seizure of control of most of the Christian heartland east and north of Beirut, indicate more than just another dissident political movement.

Already, Lebanon's Christian community of approximately 1.5 million people—less than half of the total population—has divided, and the Phalangists have lost the protection of their private army. The rebellion has alarmed the Syrian government and placed Lebanese President Amin Gemayel in his most precarious position since he succeeded his brother Bashir, who was assassinated in 1982.

The week-old mutiny, said Moslem Prime Minister Rashid Karami today in a special radio broadcast, threatens to "undermine Lebanon and terminate its existence." The result, Karami said, could be the partition into sectarian ministates, long a dream of extremist Christian leaders and a nightmarish prospect for Lebanese nationalists.

Moslem nationalists warned the rebel Christian militiamen today to back down from their revolt against Gemayel's pro-Syrian policies, saying their actions threaten to partition Lebanon.

Shiite Moslem leader Nabih Berri said that if the revolt continued it would either bring the country to "cantoning" or a violent reaction from Lebanon's Moslems. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt also has warned of a partition move, threatening that Moslem forces would "break the necks" of the Christian rebels if they continue their movement.

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When asked what outside help the Lebanese Forces might receive in the event of a Syrian attack or artillery bombardment of the Christian port city of Jounieh or even Christian east Beirut, the aide replied, "We are very conscious of the fact that the West and Israel are out of this, and we can rely on nobody to come to our rescue. We are alone."

However, he said, Syrian military intervention certainly would unify all of Lebanon's Christians around the Christian Decision Movement and the Lebanese Forces and drag the Syrian Army into what he termed "a Christian Vietnam."

The aide said, "There would be a guerrilla war. Christians would throw stones and attack worse than the Israelis found in south Lebanon. I don't think it will come to it, but if necessary we are going to fight. It may be worse then they expect."

How much popular civilian support is behind the movement led by Geagea is not clear. He is a one-time medical student who is openly Christian supremacist and boasts of leading the squad that assassinated Tony Franjeh, his wife and infant daughter along with 33 of their followers at the summer home of ex-president Suleiman Franjeh in 1978.

While the rebel movement is publicly associated with Geagea, some Christian political leaders maintained in interviews that the real force behind it is Elie Hobeika, the Lebanese Forces intelligence chief who is known for his close ties to Israel. Hobeika was linked to the massacre of Palestinian civilians in Beirut's Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in September 1982.

Gemayel's seemingly malleable relationship with the Syrians and the increasingly dominant Syrian role in Lebanese politics has cost him some support, as evidenced by increasingly popular and disparaging "Amin"

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9.

jokes passed among Christians in east Beirut, and by occasional portrait posters that have been defaced.

One influential Christian leader in east Beirut said Geagea had gained support after Gemayel's popularity waned as a result of "decisions that ran against the grain of the community, including the abrogation of the May 17 accord on Israel's pullout from Lebanon."

Moreover, the Christian leader said, "if Gemayel turns even more to the Syrians for support, his popularity will continue to decrease. If he depends on the Syrians to save him [militarily] then we would all have to fight the Syrians. Even people like us who have been neutral will have to fight the Syrians," he said.

Meanwhile, Lebanese troops were reported to have fought unidentified gunmen near a fishing village outside of Sidon today and later to cut roads leading to several Christian villages.

State-run Beirut radio said the gunmen were members of the right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces militia, but this could not be immediately confirmed.